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ABSTRACT

It has become more and more common to read and hear that the essential factor underlying effective schools is an ethos or culture of excellence and that effective school leaders are culture builders. The main purpose of this study was to ascertain administrators' views of their schools' climate. The second purpose was to examine imperative skills for success as administrators create positive school environments. Forty-one administrators from a school cooperation in a city in Indiana participated in the study. Data were collected before those administrators participated in two 3-hour workshops on the topic of diversity in fall 2001 and spring 2002. The study found that administrators perceived their support for teachers was high, but teacher absenteeism in their respective schools was a problem. Administrators ranked "developing positive relationships with staff and school personnel" as the most important skill. Suggestions generated from participating administrators provide information for other administrators as they strive to cultivate positive school cultures. (The survey instruments used for the study are included in appendices.) (Author)

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Shaping Positive School Culture: Judgments of School Administrators

Mid-Western Educational Research Association Annual Conference

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Shaping Positive School Culture:
Judgments of School Administrators

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study was to ascertain administrator views of their school climate. The second purpose was to examine imperative skills for success as administrators create positive school environments. Forty one administrators from a school cooperation in a mid-western city in Indiana participated in this study. Data were collected before those administrators participated in two three hour workshops on the topic of diversity in fall 2001 and spring 2002. This study found that administrators perceived their support for teachers was high but teacher absenteeism in their respective schools was a problem. Administrators ranked "developing positive relationships with staff and school personnel" as the most important skill. Suggestions generated from participating administrators provide information for other administrators as they strive to cultivate positive school culture.

Shaping Positive School Culture:
Judgments of School Administrators

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I. Introduction

In recent decades researchers have studied the relationship between leadership and school culture. Some researchers (Purkey & Smith, 1983) have emphasized effective schools have effective leaders. Bossert (1985) observed schools and concluded that effective elementary schools constantly demonstrate that such schools have in common "a school principal who is a strong programmatic leader."

It has become more and more common to read and hear that the essential factor underlying effective schools is an "ethos" or "culture" of excellence, and that effective school leaders are culture builders (Sashkin & Sashkin, 1993). The main purpose of this study was to ascertain administrator views of their school climate. The second purpose was to examine imperative skills for success as administrators create positive school environments.

II. Perspectives

The concept of schools having distinctive cultures is not new (Deal & Peterson, 1999). There is little doubt that teaching staff and administrators can lead the way to successful cultures where all students can learn. School cultures are keys to school achievement and student learning. According to Willard Waller (1932)

> Schools have a culture that is definitely their own. There are in the school, complex rituals of personal relationships, a set of folkways, mores, and irrational sanctions, a

> moral code based upon them. There are games, which are sublimated wars, teams, and an elaborate set of ceremonies concerning them. There are traditions, traditionalists waging their world-old battle against innovators (p. 96).

This description is still relevant in education today.

Beneath the conscious awareness of everyday life in school is a stream of thought and activity. This thought and behavior is powerful, yet difficult to define. The term culture provides a more accurate and understandable way for school leaders to comprehend the power and force in school.

The concept of culture helps us understand patterns of human behavior, thought, and norms. In an extensive study Newman and Associates (1996) concluded school success flourished in cultures with a focus on student learning, a commitment to high expectations, social support for innovation, dialogue, and the search for new ideas. They also found that schools have an "ethos of caring, sharing, and mutual help among staff and between staff and students, based on respect, trust and shared power relations among staff" (p.289).

The challenge for school leaders today is to shape and nurture a school culture in which children can have a sense of belonging. Today as never before, schools are facing many problems both inside and outside the schools. The concept of school culture offers school and district leaders a more holistic way to look at the school. One of the most important abilities of today's school leaders is to be a culture builder, one who instills the values of concern for others, personal and group success, and continuous improvement.

Fyans and Maehr (1990, in Stolp & Smith, 1995) assessed five dimensions of school culture: emphasis on excellence and pursuit of academic challenges; emphasis on interpersonal competition and socially comparative achievement; emphasis on social

recognition for achievement; perceived sense of community; and perception that school stresses certain purposes and goals (29). They concluded that not only is culture a determinant of student motivation and student achievement, but a healthy culture can also support safe and collaborative learning environments.

School culture and climate have been used interchangeably (Krug, 1983). Krug further explained, "Culture as a concept includes the beliefs, behaviors, customs, and practices of a social organization, and climate referred to a set of beliefs or perceptions about the organization (p. 168).

Deal and Peterson (1999) analyzed elements of positive and successful school cultures as:

- A mission focused on student and teacher learning;
- A rich sense of history and purpose;
- Core values of collegiality, performance, and improvement that engender quality, achievement, and learning for everyone;
- Shared leadership that balances continuity and improvement; and
- A widely shared sense of respect and caring for everyone.

For schools to be successful there is a need for administrators to recognize their respective school culture and build upon positive factors to promote a healthy climate for individuals.

An audit of a school's learning-working climate is a systematic process for identifying attitudes, opinions, and beliefs that individuals perceive to be true about the school (Ellsberry, 1999). For schools to be successful there is a need for administrators

to recognize their respective school climate and build upon positive factors to promote a healthy climate for individuals.

III. Background of This Research

This research took place in a school cooperation in a middle sized town in Indiana. In the year of 2000, the school district had 8, 526 students, among them 1,932 (22.7%) were minority (US Census Bureau, 2000). There were eleven elementary schools, two middle schools and two high schools in this school district. Due to the high minority student drop out rate among two high schools (one had 21.7% and the other had 23.1% minority students) with students graduation rates of 78% comparing to that of 88% for the State of Indiana , the school district was on probation. To remove the probation, one of the requirements was to raise the awareness and increase the sensitivity toward minority students among administrators. Therefore this researcher was invited in to conduct workshops for the administrators on the topic of "Diversity". The superintendent, all principals, assistant principals, and counselors attended two three hour workshops. Case studies and small group discussions were main strategies in working with these administrators. Surveys were conducted at the beginning of each workshop.

IV. Methodology

This study utilized literature review and survey methodologies. This study was conducted during Fall of 2001 and Spring of 2002. Data were collected at the beginning of the workshop as each administrator participated in two three-hour workshops in the central office on the topic of "Diversity". Findings were shared to generate discussions.

Forty one administrators were invited to respond to two surveys developed by this researcher. The first survey, The School Climate survey (See Appendix 1), used Likert-type four point scales. The second survey, The Imperative Skills for Success As Administrators survey (See Appendix 2), asked participants to rank the degree of importance of judged skills. Data were tabulated.

V. Summary of the Findings

Thirty nine administrators responded to the school climate survey. Ninety seven percent of the participants (N=38) reported that their school had a friendly atmosphere. Thirty seven (94.8%) reported administrative support for teachers was high. Seventy four percent (N=29) agreed that teacher absenteeism in their school was a problem. Fifty six percent (N=22) reported workload for administrators was too much to manage.

Forty one participants responded to the skills for success survey. Twenty two administrators (53.6%) ranked skills necessary to relate positively with staff and human relationships dealing with school personnel as the most important skills (N=25, 60.9%). Twenty four (58.5%) administrators ranked "possesses and reflects acceptable ethical practices" as an important skill for administrators. Although these administrators did not suggest any specific training skills to cultivate their personal skills, they expressed views that workshops such as diversity and human relationships would be helpful. Having financial resources to hire more support staff was another often referred comment.

VI. Importance of This Study

School is a place where all persons can grow. A school climate that stimulates personal growth, enhances positive self-image of the school, and promotes achievement is a necessity for excellence to occur. This study provided participating administrators opportunity to respond regarding their school culture. Suggestions generated from these administrators not only is beneficial to the participated administrators and other administrators in order to increase sensitivity to build positive school culture but also increase administrators' opportunity to reflect on their daily practice.

It is the utmost goal that through such effort administrators will cultivate a positive school culture for students, teachers, and staff. This study raised implications for policy makers and educational leadership training programs to provide more information and practice regarding individual differences and diversity to enhance administrator personal skills.

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Appendix 1

School Climate Survey

Direction: As you read each statement, circle the number that best describes how you feel as an administrator about your school. Do not circle more than one number for each statement.

Value of the number: **1) strongly disagree, 2) disagree, 3) agree, &, 4) strongly agree**

School Atmosphere/Morale

1. Our school has a friendly atmosphere.	1	2	3	4
2. Our school is an excellent place to work.	1	2	3	4
3. Teachers in our school are usually happy.	1	2	3	4

Teacher/Administrator Relationships

1. Administrative support for teachers is high.	1	2	3	4
2. Teachers and administrators work cooperatively.	1	2	3	4
3. The principal is seen as an effective leader.	1	2	3	4

Peer Relationship

1. Personal interactions among teachers are positive.	1	2	3	4
2. Teachers in our school get along well together.	1	2	3	4
3. New teachers are made to feel welcome and a part of Our school.	1	2	3	4

Working Conditions

1. Resources needed for effective teaching are adequate.	1	2	3	4
2. Workload for administrators is fair and manageable.	1	2	3	4
3. Support staff is competent and cooperative.	1	2	3	4

Teacher Attitudes and Behaviors

1. Teacher absenteeism in our school is not a problem.	1	2	3	4
2. School policies and regulations are fair.	1	2	3	4
3. School policies and regulations are followed by teachers In the school.	1	2	3	4
4. Teachers in the school are supportive to the principal.	1	2	3	4

Appendix 2

Imperative Skills for Success As Administrators

Directions: Please rank the following factors in relation to your perception of importance with **one (1)** being **the most important** and **seven (7)** being **the least importance**.

FACTOR	RANK ORDER
a. Finance and budget development skills	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
b. Overall knowledge of curriculum	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
c. Human relationships dealing with external publics (outside the school)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
d. Knowledge of building programs	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
e. Human relationships dealing with internal publics (school personnel)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
f. Skill in promoting effective staff development	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
g. Effective use of personnel by delegating responsibilities	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
h. Motives personnel toward professional self-improvement and advancement	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
i. Skills necessary to relate positively with staff	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
j. Skill in developing a framework for evaluation of programs and personnel	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
k. Possesses and reflects acceptable ethical practices	1 2 3 4 5 6 7

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